

[Recollections of a Pioneer]

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Recollections of a Pioneer

By C.L. Ray.

At this time [Culbertson?] was the nearest town to the forks of the Republican and was quite a trading place for the cow boys. The town was divided into two parts. A man by the name of Taylor was a republican and held forth, in the west end, and John Kleven postmaster, blacksmith and head of the democratic party. Each end had a hotel and store. The log school house was surrounded by a sod wall as a kind of fort to be used in case of an Indian raid. The first person with whom I became acquainted there was Joe Snyder, a young fellow who was with Taylor and who later was elected county superintendent and drew \$300 salary. Later he ran a lumber yard at [?], was county treasurer, and later representative of the legislature. The cow boys used to have a little fun sometimes in their own way, but it was disconcerting to those not used to them. The winter of 1879 and '80 many of the cowboys stayed at Culbertson.

One day they went down to Indianola, looked up the sheriff and tore the front out of a saloon and shot up the town. Another time a fellow came in on the stage and put up at the Culbertson hotel. During the night the boys gathered around and shot up into the caves and even shot out some of the window lights in the room where the fellow was sleeping. He left on the stage before daylight the next morning. C152/27/41 Nebraska

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In the spring of '80 a young fellow came to town claiming to be a cowpuncher from Australia. He wanted to know if they rode steers here to herd on, saying that if they did he was alright. He seems to be something of a "blow." There was an old well in the center of the street ten or twelve feet deep and one night when the boys knew the Australian could hear, two of them got out behind the corner of the store and said that it had been a long time since any one had gone into the well, and thought it would be all right to put the Australian in there the next night. The next morning the man was gone and was never heard of after. During the winter of '79-80 was a mild one in the west. There was a little snow and the Republican river was frozen over but a short time. The coldest spell we had was just before Christmas when the thermometer got down to twenty below. The ice went out of the river before New Year's and it did not freeze over again until February.

The ranch where I worked had some hay up the South Fork and we made use of this latter cold spell to get it home. A man by the name of Johnny Cotton and I did the hauling with two ponies on the tongue and two Spanish mules in the lead. We used to start before daylight so as to get back before the ice get too soft in the middle of the day to hold up the outfit. We got it all over except a little bit we went after rather late the last morning.

We waded at South Fork, the team bucking through the ice all right, but when we reached the North Fork the ice seemed to be stronger and held up the mules until they got upon it when it broke up in big cakes and floated off with them so they could not keep their footing. The mules got tired of this finally and lay down in the water. There was nothing to do then but throw our load into the river and wade around in the water and break a path through the ice.

Johnny Cotton so called because of his white hair was a Chicago boy who had come west right after the Chicago fire and had drifted around over much of the west and had seen some pretty rough times according to his talk. He was a generous hearted boy, pleasant,

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and a little inclined to bluff. The boys on the river used to say that he would get killed some day because he did not have the grit to shoot when it came to a question of shooting first.

In the fall of 1890 John with some others had been down to Indianola with beef cattle and having taken on a little of John Barleycorn cowboy fashion, thought to have a little fun with the mail carrier. So they stopped the carrier in the road and demanded the registered letters and put a few bullet holes through his rig. I don't suppose the carrier was scared for he knew them all and knew they did not mean to molest the mail. The next day it was reported that the United States marshal from Culbertson was coming up after John. John left the country, but no complaint had been made, the idea was simply to scare the boys out of the country.

Three years later I was in Hebron Nebraska. One winter day picking up an Omaha Republican lying on the counter in one of the stores I saw this from Fort Robison Nebraska: John Cotton, otherwise Sayles, who keeps the neighboring "hog ranch" walked into the saloon here today and shot a soldier who lay on the floor in a drunken sleep and skipped out." This is the last I ever heard of Cotton.

One day in the fall of '79 about noon we looked over south and saw smoke. It was a still day but we knew it was a prairie fire. We found that the fire evidently started from some one passing along the Wallace trail and dropping a lighted match. Just as we had it put out four or five "gansters" came rushing up on horseback. They were on a hunting trip up the South Fork and while in camp for dinner saw the smoke and came back to put out the fire. They appeared frightened and laid the origin of the fire to one of their party who lighted a pipe.

One day when the whole north was full of smoke and a big fire seemed to be raging over south, we started out to save the range. We went about ten miles to the bend of the Big Timber where some homesteaders from Sioux City had located. Some of them had come from Atwood that day and they said the fire was south of the trail that ran west on the

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divide near the center of Cheyenne County, Kansas. As there was no wind we went back to the ranch. It was cloudy and the fire lit up the sky until we could see our shadows. The next day the boss put me on one of the best ponies on the ranch and told me to go and see where it was. I went to Indian Creek and the fire was as far away apparently as ever. We went on until we came out on the hard land past the sand hills at the head of the creek. Before we turned back we saw a long string of something we could not tell whether cattle or Indians. We get off and looked to the saddle girths and made ready for a run if we had to. But after watching the figures for sometime and noticing that they did not get any nearer we concluded that they must be cattle. The mirage made the cattle seem very tall like men on horseback and with a little wind they had all the appearance at a distance of men on horseback an a dead run.